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Fighting Against High Winter Heating Costs

A Survival Guide

For months now, filling our gas tanks has emptied our wallets. Unfortunately, it appears that a similar trend will follow this winter as the price of natural gas is expected to increase an average of 48 percent nationwide over last winter. This means that the 57 percent of the 110 million households nationwide that use natural gas to heat their homes will see a spike in their heating bills. In Southeast Missouri, the Missouri Public Service Commission (PSC), which regulates investor-owned natural gas utilities such as Ameren UE, Atmos, and Missouri Natural Gas, projects customers will see a 42-percent increase in their heating bill this winter as compared to last year. Although this estimate is less than the national level, the increase is unacceptable.



To protect against price gouging, natural gas utilities must receive approval from the PSC when they want to increase rates. The PSC also runs an annual review on each retailer to further ensure that the utilities are not taking advantage of their customers. PSC Chairman Jeff Davis, a Braggadocio native, and I are watching these prices like hawks and neither of us will tolerate price gouging.

I am recommending hard-working Missourians contact their local natural gas provider and register under the Cold Weather Rule. Utility companies must work with their customers who are having difficulties paying their bills. They also have certain programs for customers who register under the Cold Weather Rule as low-income elderly or disabled. Regardless of whether you are registered or not, under the PSC's Cold Weather Rule, utilities are barred from shutting off their customers' gas supplies when the temperature is below 32 degrees.

Most experts predict that the market will adjust and the price of natural gas will fall over time, similar to the recent decline in fuel prices. However, there are several things that we can do to save on winter heating costs. Here are a few recommendations:

- Have your heating system checked for proper operation.
- Check for gaps around windows and doors, and securely caulk them.

- Keep fireplace vents closed when not in use.
- Replace furnace filters monthly if needed.
- Consider additional attic insulation.
- Place an approved insulated jacket around the hot water heater.
- Consider investing in a more energy-efficient heating unit.
- Set the thermostat at warmer levels when at home and awake, and lower levels when away or asleep.

Currently, I am working to develop solutions to combat higher heating prices. I will be filing a resolution encouraging the U.S. Congress to increase funding for the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which was created in the early 1980s to provide heating assistance to low-income families, but has not received additional funds to counteract the skyrocketing costs for consumers. Those who qualify under LIHEAP or the state-authorized Utilicare program will not have to pay reconnection fees and will have their deposit requirements suspended. For the past several years, Utilicare has not been funded. However, we are developing a plan to direct this year's unexpected increases in tax revenues from the sale of natural gas toward Utilicare to help Missourians who are having difficulty paying their heating bills. Natural-gas is not a luxury, but a necessity, and Missourians should not have to choose between heating their homes and feeding their families. I will do what I can to ensure that this winter, Missourians can afford being comfortably warm in their own homes.

First Important Lesson- Cleaning Lady

Finally, this week a friend of mine sent me an e-mail entitled: Five Important Lessons To Make You Think About the Way You Treat People. For the next five weeks, I will share with you a lesson from this e-mail.

First Important Lesson- Cleaning Lady During my second month of college, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one:

“What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?” Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired, and in her 50s, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward the quiz grade.

“Absolutely,” said the professor. “In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say ‘hello.’” I’ve never forgotten that lesson. I learned her name was Dorothy.

Contact Me

As always, I appreciate hearing your comments, opinions and concerns. Please feel free to contact me in Jefferson City at (573) 751-2459. You may write to me at Jason Crowell; Missouri Senate; State Capitol; Jefferson City, MO 65101, or email me at: jcrowell@senate.mo.gov or visit me on the web at <http://www.jasoncrowell.com> and <http://www.senate.mo.gov/crowell>.

*Senator Jason Crowell proudly represents the people of Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, Madison,
Mississippi, Perry and Scott counties in the Missouri Senate.*